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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 001418

SIPDIS

AF FOR DAS T. WOODS  
AF/S FOR B. NEULING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/17/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ZI](#)

SUBJECT: THE INCIDENT THAT WASN'T

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell for reasons 1.5 b/d

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Summary

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[¶1.](#) (SBU) While on a nature walk the afternoon of October 10 (Columbus Day) the Ambassador inadvertently stumbled into a poorly marked military installation in the midst of Harare's Public Botanical Garden. The soldiers on duty, who were unfamiliar with diplomatic credentials, briefly detained the Ambassador while seeking guidance from their superiors. The Ambassador notified post of the situation and we succeeded in contacting the MFA. However, the military resolved the matter before the MFA was able to locate the appropriate military authority. Both the Commander of the Presidential Guard Battalion and the MFA were profusely apologetic, with senior officials expressing relief that a diplomatic incident had been averted. We considered the incident closed.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) However, on Wednesday, October 12, the MFA sent a protest note, which accused the Ambassador of a deliberate provocation. The note was then leaked to the press and formed the basis for a number of articles both locally and internationally, including a highly critical piece in the GOZ-controlled Herald. The article quoted Mugabe's press spokesman, whom we believe to have been behind the GOZ decision to create an incident after all. U.S. press guidance, deployed Friday, October 14, helped to defuse the situation and formed the basis for an article in the independent Standard newspaper, which set the record straight over the weekend. End Summary.

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A Walk in the Park

[¶3.](#) (SBU) The weather in Harare during the southern African spring is even more beautiful than normal: sunny days with a few puffs of clouds, warm temperatures moderated by a cooling breeze. And nature responds accordingly with an astonishing display of flowering trees, bushes and plants ) the most famous of which are the purple blossoms of the jacaranda trees. On Monday, October 10 ) Columbus Day ) the jacarandas were in full bloom. The Ambassador took advantage of the Columbus Day holiday to go for a walk in Harare's Public Botanical Gardens, located near the center of the city, minutes from downtown, and take a few photographs to send home.

[¶4.](#) (SBU) In the midst of this public park is a poorly marked and poorly protected Zimbabwean military installation: three antiaircraft guns there to supposedly protect President Mugabe's official residence ) State House, about a mile from the Botanical Gardens. Visitors to the park stumble into the installation with great regularity. On that afternoon, it was the Ambassador's turn. The signs denoting the presence of a security zone ) broken and faded ) seemed to warn visitors away from the city's water works, which are also located in the park behind a chain link fence. By staying outside the marked area and following what appeared to be the trail back toward the parking lot, the Ambassador, like many before him, was led straight into the unmarked and unfenced anti-aircraft battery.

[¶5.](#) (SBU) The two guards who initially intercepted him told the Ambassador that this as a common mistake but before they had a chance to shoo him away ) as they had done with another Embassy officer a few weeks before ) a more senior guard arrived and taking charge decided, probably because of the camera, to detain the Ambassador. The Ambassador identified himself and presented his diplomatic credentials, which stumped all of the guards. A Lieutenant was called, who decided to take the Ambassador to the Presidential Guards Headquarters to sort out what was to be done. Almost immediately after arrival at the headquarters, a Lt. Colonel appeared and offered his Commander's apologies for the inconvenience and the Ambassador departed.

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The Aftermath: First Apologies, Then Recriminations

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16. (SBU) Later that evening, the MFA Head of Protocol, Ambassador Gapare, whom we had contacted for assistance, called the Ambassador to apologize, explaining that the Zimbabwean military were unfamiliar with diplomatic identification. The MFA's Permanent Secretary, Ambassador Bimha, called the Ambassador the next day with further apologies for the detention. Both individuals expressed relief to the DCM at a reception for Spain's National day on October 12 that a diplomatic incident had been avoided. The Ambassador had left that morning to help inaugurate the new Embassy in Luanda, which had been started on his watch, or doubtless both would have once more apologized to him in person.

17. (SBU) However, the next day, the Embassy received a diplomatic note from the MFA that was very different in tone, accusing the Ambassador of deliberately trespassing on a secure installation in an attempt to provoke a diplomatic incident. The Embassy apprised the Ambassador while in Luanda about the note and began working on a reply to await his return. That evening, the PAO got wind that the note had been leaked to the press and that the official Herald newspaper was preparing a critical article for publication the next day. The news was also picked up that evening internationally, by AP and CNN among others.

18. (SBU) Fortunately, the Embassy and the Department had guidance ready for Friday morning presenting our side of the story. Since Thursday, there has been only one additional article locally, printed in the Standard on Saturday, which used our guidance as its basis and did much to set the record straight. There have been no further critical articles in the government-controlled press and the issue appears to have been defused by the restrained U.S. response, as we had hoped.

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Comment  
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19. (C) As near as we can tell it was the President's office that decided to create an incident, in the process overruling the MFA. President Mugabe's Press Spokesman, George Charamba, was quoted in the Herald article criticizing the Ambassador and appears to have been the source of the leaked diplomatic note (if not its author). Charamba has taken on the more odious of former Information Minister Jonathon Moyo's duties, including the dissemination of propaganda, and clearly saw an opportunity to distract the public's attention from the regime's current woes. Thus, the ominous references in the Herald article to the risk of being shot, etc. (In fact, the soldiers who initially stopped the Ambassador were unarmed at the time and courteous throughout, asking many questions about the U.S. and the Ambassador's impression of life in Zimbabwe.) Having succeeded in stirring things up a bit, Charamba and the rest of the GOZ appear satisfied. There have been no further articles or communication with the GOZ on this topic. We believe the controversy has already blown itself out.

DELL